

‘Just stretch it out and try to dance’: Young Irish dancers’ views and experiences of pain and injury

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Dancers frequently experience pain and injury due to the physical demands of performance. Previous research primarily focuses on professional dancers over the age of 18 years, and Irish dance has been largely unexplored, with research from a sociological perspective particularly lacking. To address these gaps, the purpose of this study was to explore the influence of the culture of Irish dance on young female dancers’ views and experiences of pain and injury. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with eight girls (aged 11-16 years) from an Irish dance academy in the North West of England. We analysed the data by engaging in thematic analysis, and drew on Bourdieu’s concepts (habitus and capital, in particular) to explain our findings. Key themes within the data were: the values of Irish dance; trust and teamwork; and strength and weakness. The findings show that Irish dancers make sacrifices to achieve success, and the culture of Irish dance encourages them to dance through pain and injury in order to appear strong. While dancers recognise the potential consequences of injury and believe it is beneficial to take time away from training to recover, they are often encouraged (and encourage each other) to persevere through pain and injury. The findings suggest that there are some potentially harmful consequences of the Irish dance culture, as pain and injury are normalised. We suggest that coaches (and parents/guardians) should encourage young dancers to engage with self-care, and ensure they are not risking their future health and wellbeing by dancing through pain and injury.

Keywords: Irish dance, qualitative, Bourdieu, habitus, capital

Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a sociological study that investigated young female Irish dancers’ views and experiences of pain and injury. Irish dance developed in Ireland during the 18th and 19th centuries (Noon et al., 2010), but since *Riverdance*

was launched in the mid-1990s, the genre has become increasingly popular and competitive internationally (Cahalan et al., 2018). McEwen and Young (2011) observe that because dance involves aesthetically pleasing performances within a world of make-up, costumes and staging, the presence of pain and injury is often overlooked. Irish dance is characterised by an upright upper body position with the arms held rigid at the side, and rapid foot and leg movements, often performed on the balls of the feet (Stein et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2015). It also involves jumps and standing ‘on toe’ (similar to ‘en pointe’ in ballet) (Noon et al., 2010). Its increasingly athletic and competitive nature leaves dancers susceptible to injury as challenging choreography, and additional hours of practice, place intense physical demands on them (Cahalan et al., 2015). Previous research indicates that, similar to other elite dance genres, pain and injury are commonplace in Irish dance (Cahalan et al., 2016). However, many Irish dancers continue dancing through pain and injury (Stein et al., 2013). Our aim is to investigate the reasons for this, by exploring young Irish dancers’ views and experiences.

There is a lack of qualitative research on pain and injury in Irish dance, but a growing body of literature has explored dancers’ perceptions of pain and injury in other forms of dance. Thomas and Tarr (2009), for instance, investigated modern and contemporary dancers’ interpretations of pain and injury. The dancers defined injury as something that prevented them from dancing. The modern and contemporary dancers in Markula’s (2015) study defined injury in a similar way. In contrast, they perceived pain as ‘a natural part of dance’ (Markula, 2015: 844) and were not worried about pushing through it. While Thomas and Tarr’s (2009) participants found it more difficult to define pain than injury, they distinguished between different types of pain;

‘bad pain’ was associated with the potential for further damage or injury, while ‘good pain’ was tolerable and induced by training.

These studies indicate that many dancers continue to dance when in pain, despite the potential consequences for their health and wellbeing. Dancers are socialised into a culture which encourages them to tolerate pain and injury, and accept them as inevitable aspects of being a dancer (Aalten, 2007; Addison et al., 1998; Turner and Wainwright, 2003). Individuals enter the world of dance at a young age and internalise the notion that discipline, perseverance and dedication are central values within the culture (Gupta, 2013). As such, pain and injury are normalised and, following McEwen and Young (2011), we argue that dance can, like sport, be considered a ‘culture of risk’ (Nixon, 1993). As Russell (2013: 199) argues, ‘dancers are clearly athletes in the degree to which they require sophisticated physical capacities to perform at a high level. [...] In dance, as in any athletic activity, injuries are prevalent.’

Sociological research indicates that the culture of risk encourages the normalisation of pain and injury (McEwen and Young, 2011), as persevering through pain and injury is a sign of commitment to the sports ethic (Malcom, 2006). The sports ethic refers to the belief that ‘real’ athletes make sacrifices, strive for distinction, accept risks and refuse limits (Hughes and Coakley, 1991). McEwen and Young (2011) argue that the sports ethic is present in dance too, as individuals similarly make sacrifices, push through pain barriers and accept the risk of injury to achieve success. As Wilson et al. (2015: 448) note, ‘Dance is as much a sport as an art form’. Dancers, then, like athletes, tolerate pain and injury as ‘no pain, no gain’ becomes a central belief (Tynan and McEvilly, 2017). Since the dance world tends to feature more women than men (McEwen and Young, 2011), it is important to note

that the sociology of sport research shows that both male and female athletes are willing to train and compete when in pain and/or injured (Tynan and McEvilly, 2017).

To examine the culture of dance, numerous studies have drawn on Bourdieu's concepts (e.g. Turner and Wainwright, 2003; Wainwright et al., 2005). Bourdieu focused on the role of social institutions in the creation of norms, and how this process impacts on the production and shaping of human agency (Wainwright and Turner, 2004). As such, although he did not explicitly refer to dance, Bourdieu's concepts are useful when examining the experiences of social groups (Aalten, 2005), such as Irish dance academies, because of the emphasis on both structure and agency.

According to Bourdieu (1993), people enter specific fields – social arenas with distinct stimuli, rules and values – within society, where they are exposed to unique social conditions, which affect their perceptions and behaviours (Wacquant, 2008). When individuals enter the world of dance, the relationships they develop with other dancers and coaches influence their experiences (Aujla et al., 2014). Socialisation may involve young dancers learning that coaches are in control and will 'toughen them up' to enhance their dance ability (Stafford et al., 2013: 297). From a young age, the values promoted by coaches and other dancers inform their behaviours surrounding pain and injury (Shannon, 2016). Therefore, dancers may develop a habitus in which pain and injury are considered normal (Markula, 2015).

The dancers' habitus – beliefs and dispositions which are internalised and shape their behaviour – generates a desire to act in a socially acceptable manner (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1993), in order to acquire capital (Roberts, 2009). The amount of social (belonging to a group), cultural (skills and knowledge), economic (financial assets) and symbolic (prestige) 'wealth' individuals possess influences their status within the group (Wacquant, 2008). For example, dancers must promote the

central values of the field, such as dedication and perseverance, by accepting the risk of pain and injury, in order to increase their social and symbolic capital (Addison et al., 1998). From this perspective, if a dancer continues to dance through pain and injury, their status and capital will increase (Wainwright et al., 2005).

The members create a group habitus – a set of fundamental values – to become unified and achieve social distinction (Sudgen and Tomilson, 2008). This concept suggests that dancers feel a sense of belonging within the academy and that the habitus influences their perceptions (Turner and Wainwright, 2003). Cahalan and O’Sullivan (2013a) investigated Irish dancers’ perceptions of being part of a team and performing in shows, and found that long-lasting friendships and the notion of teamwork influence their perceptions towards pain and injury. McEwen and Young (2011) found that dancers conceal pain and injury because they feel they may be criticised for taking time away from the team. The group belief that ‘the show must go on’ means individual dancers internalise the pressure to perform, and this notion becomes a fundamental aspect of their habitus (Wainwright et al., 2005: 59). Overburdening the body is considered a risk they must take, and dancing through pain and injury is expected (Aalten, 2007). Cahalan and O’Sullivan (2013a) report that Irish dancers dance through injury, or return to training as quickly as possible afterwards, suggesting that the central values of the field encourage them to persevere through it.

Our aim is to investigate these issues further, by focusing on young Irish dancers. As such, the purpose of the study was to explore the influence of the culture of Irish dance on young dancers’ views and experiences of pain and injury. Literature on pain and injury in Irish dance is scarce (Cahalan et al., 2015; Stein et al., 2013), and research from a sociological perspective is particularly lacking. There is also a

gap regarding young dancers' perceptions, as many previous studies involve adult dancers (Gamboa et al., 2008). By focusing on young Irish dancers, we aim to build on and expand the current body of sociological research on pain and injury in dance generally, and in Irish dance in particular.

Methodology

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with eight Irish dancers (aged 11-16 years), who were recruited from an Irish dance academy in the North West of England. At the time of data collection, there were two coaches (one male and one female) and 50 members (three male and 47 female, aged four to 21 years), 22 of whom competed regularly.

The lead author had been a member of the academy since 2012. It is important for us to acknowledge the 'baggage' that influences data collection and analysis (Richards, 2014), and to reflect on how her relationships with the participants may have impacted on the research. The fact that Rebecca trained with the participants for several years means they were likely to be comfortable with her. This may have benefited the research, as interactions between children and adults they are familiar with can reveal valuable insights into their perspectives (Greig et al., 2012). If the participants did not know Rebecca, they may have felt less comfortable with the interview situation and their responses may not have been as detailed. However, since they progressed through their dancing careers alongside Rebecca, she may have influenced their views. As an older member of the academy, younger girls may have looked up to her and considered her attitudes and behaviours as a model to replicate. Furthermore, if Rebecca was not involved in Irish dance, her views towards the culture may have been different. She would have had less knowledge about the field,

and the ways in which pain and injury are experienced within it. This ‘baggage’ means that another researcher would have had different assumptions about, and interpretations of, the data (Tynan and McEvilly, 2017).

After gaining ethical approval from the authors’ departmental research ethics committee, Rebecca approached potential participants and their parents/guardians at the academy. Purposive sampling was employed. The participants had to be: female; aged 11 to 16 years; competitive at championship level; and involved in shows organised by the coaches. The decision to only involve girls was due to the limited number of male dancers involved in Irish dance, and because boys are likely to have different experiences within the culture (Gard, 2008). The age range was selected because, while many studies have examined dancers over the age of 18 (Gamboa et al., 2008), competitive dancers often start training at a much younger age (Gupta, 2013). Regarding competition level (see Table 1), Irish dancers compete in preliminary championships until they succeed and progress to open championship. Open championship dancers compete at regional, national and international events in the hope of qualifying for the World Championships and train for at least five hours a week. The participants also perform in non-competitive shows.

Informed consent was received from the participants’ parents/guardians, and from the girls themselves (British Educational Research Association, 2011). This ensured that the girls knew what their involvement entailed and confirmed them as true volunteers (Simons, 2009). It was important to emphasise (both verbally and on the participant information sheets) that participation was voluntary, so that the girls did not feel pressured to participate. Pseudonyms are used to protect their anonymity. Participant information is outlined in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet room at the training space. The interview guide was comprised of open-ended questions in order to delve into the girls' views and experiences of pain and injury, and gently probe their responses (Greig et al., 2012). The girls were asked, for example, to explain what they understood by 'pain', and to discuss their experiences of pain within Irish dance. They were asked about how other people (e.g. coaches, other dancers, parents) treated them while they were in pain. They were asked similar questions about injury.

The interviews (which ranged in duration from nine to 23 minutes) were transcribed and analysed thematically, following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author read and re-read the transcripts, generating initial codes, in order to identify patterns in the data and incidences where codes overlapped and related to one another (Clarke and Braun, 2013). She identified a collection of potential themes, which were subsequently grouped together or broken down into sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, 'shared experiences' and 'social distinction' were sub-themes grouped under the (initially defined) theme of 'the Irish dancing experience'. The second author, who also read the transcripts multiple times, acted as a 'critical friend' to encourage exploration of alternative interpretations of the data (Smith and McGannon, 2017). Having a 'critical friend' was important because of Rebecca's 'baggage', as discussed above. In discussing and reviewing the themes, for example, we renamed 'the Irish dancing experience' as 'trust and teamwork' for clarity. The three key themes constructed during data analysis are discussed below. We draw on Bourdieu's concepts to make sense of these themes, in order to explore the participants' views and experiences of pain and injury in Irish dance.

Findings and discussion

Before delving into the dancers' experiences of pain and injury, the lead author asked them to define these concepts. Five girls described pain as a multidimensional concept, with physical and psychological elements. Amber, for example, stated that physical pain is 'when your body's hurting and mental pain is about, like, stress'. The idea that pain is multidimensional was reinforced by Holly, Laura, Carly and Lucy, who mentioned different 'levels' of pain. According to Laura, there is 'mild pain, that's not that bad, or it could be more severe that could stop you from doing things'. Unlike the dancers in Thomas and Tarr's (2009) research, who mentioned 'good pain', the participants in our study stated that pain only occurs 'when your body hurts' (Megan). All eight dancers had experienced pain while dancing, most commonly in relation to their knees, feet and pulled muscles. This is not surprising, given the repetitive nature of lower extremity movements in Irish dancing (Noon et al., 2010).

When defining injury, the girls spoke about bodies becoming damaged or hurt, and provided numerous examples, such as stress fractures, dislocated knees, and pulled muscles. Similar to dancers in Markula's (2015) study, who defined injury as something that prevented them from dancing, four girls mentioned occasions when injuries interrupted their training schedules. Amber defined injury as 'physically damaging your body' and suggested that overuse injuries are more prevalent in Irish dancing than traumatic injuries. All eight dancers appeared to share this view, mentioning overuse injuries (e.g. sore muscles, pulled ligaments and strains) they had experienced, whereas only Holly, Carly and Alex talked about traumatic injuries (e.g. dislocated knees, broken toes).

The interviews went on to explore the dancers' views and experiences of pain and injury within the world of Irish dance. We now examine the key themes identified during data analysis:

- (1) 'I've had to learn to dance through it': the values of Irish dance
- (2) 'Other people are counting on you': trust and teamwork
- (3) 'I don't like people to think that I'm not strong enough': strength and weakness.

'I've had to learn to dance through it': the values of Irish dance

The dancers mentioned the repetitive nature of Irish dance and maintained that dancing increases the risk of pain and injury. Alex suggested, 'you can hurt yourself a lot in Irish dancing', while Holly spoke about the 'joints or muscles that Irish dancers use' being the reason why individuals are susceptible to injury. These comments indicate that they accepted the norms of the field (Bourdieu, 1993) and regarded pain and injury as inevitable aspects of dancing (Aalten, 2007).

The central values of Irish dance were mentioned as the sign of a successful dancer, with the participants referring to hard work, perseverance and dedication. Amber, for instance, stated that dedication to dance has made her 'a stronger person because I've had to learn to dance through it [pain and injury]'. This comment suggests that Amber believes that persevering through pain and injury increases social capital (Wacquant, 2008), and supports Addison et al.'s (1998) argument that dancers push through pain barriers to achieve status. When asked about dealing with pain, Alex talked about 'not being scared to dance over and hurt stuff', while Amber mentioned the 'mind-sets' of people involved in Irish dance, and alluded to coaches' social and symbolic capital:

They have different mind-sets...my coach is more inclined to pressure me because the dance world is more [pressured]...he has, like, his reputation to maintain and try to create the best dancers.

These comments suggest that dancers internalise the habitus within Irish dance, and believe that group norms must be respected (Bourdieu, 1990). The participants, similar to the ballerinas in McEwen and Young's (2011) research, indicated that the competitive atmosphere encourages them to risk pain and injury. Several girls spoke about being encouraged to dance through pain and injury during competitions:

For a major¹, for a big competition, he – my teacher – would be like, 'It's only one dance. Just do your best, try and get your kicks up, it'll only hurt for a split second'. (Laura)

I had a competition and my dance teacher just said to 'pull it together and try and dance'. (Alex)

If I was competing, I'd either carry on or fall over because that's what my dance teacher tells us to do. (Carly)

This encouragement reinforces the doxa (rules) of the field, which teach dancers to react a particular way when exposed to certain stimuli (Fevre and Bancroft, 2010).

¹ 'Majors' refer to national and international competitions, such as the World Championships, British Nationals and All Irelands. At these competitions, championship dancers compete to win World or National titles.

Thus, the encouragement to continue dancing normalises pain and injury (Malcolm, 2009).

Similarly, the expectation that dancers will always attend training was highlighted. The girls spoke about falling behind, in terms of steps and technique, and being under-prepared for competition. As Laura explained, ‘Dancers like me don’t want to stop doing what they love. They want to keep progressing and get better.’ When asked why she attends training when in pain, Charlotte responded, ‘I wanted to practise and not let the pain distract me’. She went on to explain that pushing through pain was important for competitions: ‘I would want to compete and not give up on something I’ve worked so hard on’. This again revealed that the pressure to compete is central within the field and that perseverance is expected (Markula, 2015).

While the dancers in McEwen and Young’s (2011) study suggested that coaches use their authority to promote excessive training, the four youngest dancers in our study noted that the coach ‘tells you to, like, sit down when...if he notices you’re in pain’ (Carly). This finding suggests that younger dancers are released from training to recover. However, this awareness did not always encourage dancers to open up. Wilson et al. (2015) report that dancers are often reluctant to disclose that they are in pain or injured, as they fear being advised to rest or modify their training. In this vein, Megan talked about concealing pain, as she was worried she would be dismissed from training. She commented, ‘if I told him [coach], he’d tell me to rest’, which was not something she felt proved her commitment. She explained, ‘I just wanted to practise and not just sit down.’ Megan may have been influenced by the different approach the coach appeared to take with older dancers. The oldest girls suggested that the coach expects individuals to dance through pain and injury:

He pretty much says to carry on the whole time. [...] I think, like, the older you get, the more he expects you to just dance through. (Holly)

He knows that dancing through an injury could cause more damage but it might be necessary. [...] I think it's because I'm a more experienced dancer that he expects me to know how to deal with my injuries and know when it's too serious to carry on and, like, save myself. (Amber)

The participants acknowledged that the coach impacted on their experiences, supporting the findings of Stafford et al. (2013) where individuals accepted that they would be pushed to the limit to succeed. Furthermore, Holly commented, 'the more you are in pain, the more you kind of, like, tolerate it'. Similar to other dancers (Aalten, 2007), the participants in our study believed it was important to tolerate pain to improve technique and achieve success. This belief was reinforced as they increased their tolerance 'because we're used to it [pain]' (Carly). This again suggests the culture of Irish dance promotes an environment where dancers are encouraged to persevere through pain and injury (Anderson and Hanrahan, 2008).

'Other people are counting on you': trust and teamwork

Teamwork is a central focus of a dance academy (van Rossum, 2001), and shared experiences allow people to feel unified (Bourdieu, 1986). All eight participants mentioned the common experiences dancers encounter. They referred to the supportive and long-lasting friendships that develop:

I just enjoy dancing with my friends. (Amber)

Whenever you're injured everyone's really supportive and they'll, like, be very, like, positive towards you. (Holly)

This idea is similar to findings by Wainwright and Turner (2004) where dancers supported each another through challenging experiences. Similar to other Irish dancers (Cahalan and O'Sullivan, 2013b), the participants often talked about their injuries and asked other dancers for advice. When asked who she talks to when injured, Amber noted that other dancers 'have probably had similar injuries so can help me'. The girls mentioned that advice from other dancers is trusted and respected. Similar to the ballerinas in Wainwright et al.'s (2005) study, the participants abide by particular norms in order to increase their social capital. Their comments about getting advice from other dancers included:

When I was in pain with sore muscles in my leg, they told me to 'just stretch it out and try to dance on it'. (Amber)

They give me advice on how to get rid of it [pain] and tell me that they've had it and that it will go away soon. (Charlotte)

These quotes suggest that the girls draw on group norms to inform their behaviour (Bourdieu, 1990). The interviews revealed that older dancers, because they have more experience of the Irish dance world, possess more social, cultural and symbolic capital and act as role models for the younger girls. As Holly commented, 'younger dancers look up to the older members in the academy in the way...they deal with injury and

pain'. When asked about the advice she gave to a younger dancer, Amber responded, 'she had twisted her ankle so I advised her to just carry on because I've done the same thing myself'. Similarly, when asked how she responded when a younger dancer approached her regarding an ankle injury, Holly explained that she encouraged her to 'just put ice on it and rest'. These examples indicate that dancers promote the group habitus by supporting and encouraging each other (Fevre and Bancroft, 2010). Younger dancers trust the older dancers, who 'are older and...know more' (Holly). This view was reinforced when younger dancers spoke about older individuals encouraging them to dance through pain and injury:

They encourage me to ignore it and give me ways to fix it. [...] Because it will help me grow as a dancer and it'll teach me to carry on and push through the pain. (Charlotte)

It is clear here that the group habitus reinforces the existence of the field (Bourdieu, 1993). Dancing through pain and injury was considered a sign of commitment (Howe, 2001), and participants alluded to the notion of social distinction. The maintenance of a group habitus allows dancers to distinguish themselves from non-dancers (Bourdieu, 1990). Several girls mentioned differences in values by referring to non-dancers:

I don't think they'd understand how, like, painful it might be to have an injury to do with Irish dancing. (Laura)

They don't know what we have to do and how much it hurts with our muscles and stuff. (Lucy)

By emphasising the (perceived) differences in views within and outside of Irish dance, the girls promote a habitus with specific beliefs (Bourdieu, 1990). They have internalised the norms of the field, which they believe distinguishes them from non-dancers.

Turner and Wainwright (2003) found that ballerinas feel social bonding is important amongst dancers. The participants in our study spoke about friendships within the academy and how these influence their behaviour. In particular, they worried about letting others down. Their apparent internalisation of the group belief that ‘the show must go on’ (Wainwright et al., 2005: 59) was evident throughout the data. For example, Carly explained, ‘I want to carry on in a show because I can’t let the team down’. Similarly, Alex explained, ‘I had to dance through ceili² when I popped my knee’ as she believed other dancers would question her commitment if she stopped dancing. Numerous reasons why dancers felt they would let the team down if they missed a show were highlighted:

Other people are counting on you when you’re in shows so you, kind of, feel you need to carry on. (Holly)

It might off-put girls and stuff might go wrong, and that’s, like, the worst thing to happen if you’re doing a show. (Laura)

² A ‘ceili’ is a group dance. A ceili team eligible to qualify for the World Championships consists of eight dancers who perform a group sequence.

By dancing through pain and injury, dancers increase their capital as other members respect them for not letting the team down (Wacquant, 2008). When discussing dancing through pain, Amber explained, ‘you need to maintain your good reputation’. Amber, the most experienced dancer, considers it necessary to dance when in pain to show commitment and dedication.

While pain and injury were regarded as inevitable aspects of dance, the girls indicated that they respond differently to serious injuries. Laura recognised that ignoring or hiding an injury could mean ‘it will take a lot longer to get fixed and may put me out of dancing for a long, long time’. Amber commented that other dancers:

encourage me to dance through the pain...but if they knew it was really bad, they’d tell me to stop [...] They tell me to carry on if they know I’m not going to injure myself further, but they don’t want me to injure myself further ’cause then I’d be out for longer.

Similar to other young dancers (Shannon, 2016), the participants trusted that people involved in dance knew the best way to respond to pain and injury:

They can tell me, like, what to do and stuff. How to sort it [pain] out and things. (Carly)

They know what it’s like to be injured and, like, they know if you stop you can rest and then you’ll be able to come back better and strong. Like, wherever was hurting will be stronger. (Holly)

These comments again show how the group habitus influences the dancers' behaviours when experiencing pain and injury (Bourdieu, 1990). As Holly's comment illustrates, being strong is central to this habitus.

'I don't like people to think that I'm not strong enough': strength and weakness

The dancers spoke about the characteristics they possess, with six girls suggesting they are 'stronger' because they dance:

I think it's [dance] made me a stronger person because I've had to learn to dance through it [pain]. (Amber)

I think it [dance] has made me stronger 'cause I feel that I can cope with it [pain] more. (Laura)

Furthermore, Lucy commented that, 'I think it's made me a bit, like, stronger when it hurts'. Bourdieu (1986) would argue that dancers feel they must appear strong, to gain a reputation associated with success. As such, they did not want to appear weak. As Amber explained:

I'm more likely to hide it [pain] because...in dancing it's seen like a weakness, but not in everyday [life]. (Amber)

This comment suggests dancers conceal pain and injury as specific perceptions exist within the field (McEwen and Young, 2011). Dancing in shows encourages concealment of pain because 'it's a group effort and you're showing what everyone

can do' (Holly), while at a competition, it is important to appear strong in front of competitors. As Amber and Charlotte explained:

I don't want them to know what my weaknesses are. (Amber)

I don't like people to think that I'm not strong enough to do it. (Charlotte)

Similar to aspiring professional dancers (McEwen and Young, 2011), the participants spoke about gaining respect from their coach by competing when injured. Charlotte commented, 'I don't want him to think that I can't handle it'. This suggests that dancers internalise the central values of the field and recognise that coaches push them to succeed (Stafford et al., 2013). Laura commented:

The teacher wants you to keep practising, getting your legs higher, and getting better steps, so you can come out with better results.

Individuals must appear strong to reiterate their dance ability and increase the likelihood of being perceived as successful (Markula, 2015), by maintaining the values of the field (Bourdieu, 1986). Charlotte stated, 'you don't want to let people think that they're better than you'. Furthermore, and similar to the dancers in McEwen and Young's (2011) study, the participants perceived the presence of pain as something to be proud of. They suggested that dancers compare levels of pain, with comments including:

People might be going through worse pain at the time and it might not be worth it to tell them. I just carry on. (Megan)

I see other dancers dancing through their injuries and I have to do the same, otherwise I'd be viewed as a weaker dancer. (Amber)

This supports the findings of Nemeth et al. (2005), where gymnasts compared themselves to competitors, took pride in the presence of pain, and downplayed the seriousness of injuries. The notion of comparison was central when talking about the field of Irish dance, with the participants determined to appear strong in front of coaches, competitors and each other.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore the influence of the culture of Irish dance on young dancers' views and experiences of pain and injury. The study contributes a novel perspective to the pain and injury literature, as Irish dancers aged between 11 and 16 years were interviewed. The findings suggest that young girls are immersed into a competitive culture which promotes specific expectations and encourages them to dance through pain and injury. They internalise the values of the field and consequent pressure to perform, and so continuing to dance when in pain and/or injured becomes an unquestioned aspect of their habitus. Influences included the coaches and the idea that dancers must make sacrifices to succeed. The normalisation of pain and injury occurs due to the shared experiences amongst dancers and the notion of social distinction. As such, young girls involved in Irish dance appear to internalise similar values to individuals from other dance genres. They are socialised

into a culture where it is important to appear strong when attending competitions and to support one another when performing in shows.

The interviews revealed some potentially harmful consequences of Irish dance due to the internalisation of a group habitus. For example, Alex continued dancing when a knee injury occurred during a ceili. Being encouraged (or perhaps pressured) to dance through pain and injury may have negative, and potentially serious, consequences for young dancers' health (both physical and mental). Therefore, it is important to examine the field and problematise how an unquestioned commitment, which involves risking pain and injury, is created and reinforced. However, the young dancers also acknowledged that it is important to recognise when pain and injury are warning signals for further harm. We suggest that coaches (and parents/guardians) should encourage young dancers to engage with self-care, and ensure they are not risking their future health and wellbeing by dancing through pain and injury. It is vital that coaches remember that 'young dancers are not simply miniature professional dancers but instead are growing and developing children' (Wilson et al., 2015: 451). As such, coaches are in a powerful position and we would encourage them to reflect on the values and practices they may be reinforcing with their dancers.

The study has several limitations which should be acknowledged and potentially addressed in future research. The research involved eight female Irish dancers from a single academy. Recruiting a larger sample and examining different academies would provide greater insights into the culture and allow for more confident conclusions to be made. Future research might also involve coaches and parents/guardians, to gain a better understanding of their views, experiences and influence.

This study into an underexplored area of dance has provided a building block for future research. It raises questions about the influence of the culture of Irish dance on young girls who may develop an unquestioned commitment to dance, along with distinct perceptions about pain and injury.

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First author's biography

Rebecca Pentith graduated with a First Class BSc (Hons) in Sport and Exercise Sciences from the University of Chester, UK in October 2017. Rebecca conducted the study reported in this paper for her undergraduate dissertation project. She collected the data from July to September 2016, and presented the findings at the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science (BASES) Student Conference at the University of St Mark and St John, Plymouth in April 2017. Rebecca is currently studying for an MRes in sport and exercise psychology at the University of Chester. Her study explores the coping mechanisms used by young Irish dancers who have experienced pain and injury.

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Table 1. Participant details.

Participant	Age	Dance experience (years)	Competition level
Megan	11	6	Championship (preliminary)
Alex	11	6½	Championship (preliminary)
Carly	12	3½ - 4	Championship (preliminary)
Lucy	12	6	Championship (preliminary)
Charlotte	13	6	Championship (open)
Laura	14	3	Championship (open)
Amber	16	10	Championship (open)
Holly	16	6	Championship (open)